

The Forgotten

III—A Single Woman

FROM A SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Mr. E. F. was a boatbuilder on the East coast, and he and his wife raised seven children in comfortable circumstances. The war, however, brought business difficulties and when he died in 1944 the wife (who was 58) was left with enough money to provide her with an annuity of £7. One of the daughters was unmarried; she had had a business training and was then manageress of a high class hotel on the South Coast. It seemed to the rest of the family natural that the single daughter should undertake the care of their mother, who took a flat close to Miss E. F.

As time went on, the mother, a gentle, cultured woman became increasingly frail, and it was obvious she needed more help and company than her daughter's long and irregular hours allowed. Miss E. F. moved with her mother to a London flat, and took a post in an employment agency. She left home at 7.20 a.m., and got back after 6 p.m., and for a time her mother was able to do a little in the flat. In 1967, however, her physical and mental powers began to fail. She started to fall, and though her landlord was friendly and helpful, her daughter was always anxious about how she would find her when she got home from work. In 1969 Mrs. E. F. had a period of assessment in hospital. Her daughter was told that nothing could be done for her and that progressive mental and physical decline must be expected. Miss E. F. had to choose between allowing her mother to spend her last years in a geriatric unit, and giving up her work to look after her 84-year-old mother. She gave up her work.

Almost Completely Bedridden

Mrs. E. F. is now almost completely bedridden. She can be left for an hour or so, but no longer. She has to get her daughter up two or three times in the night to help her on to the commode. She is warm, clean, and comfortable, and though very vague is obviously content, but quite unaware of the sacrifice her daughter has made for her. Financially they are dependent on £12 a week benefit and the mother's annuity. Heating bills are high, as the old lady begins to shiver if the temperature begins to drop at all, and Miss E. F. has to spend 78p a week on her insurance stamp to qualify for her pension. She is on good terms with her brothers and sisters, but they do not feel able to offer financial help. Clothes are not yet a problem, since the daughter was well stocked when she stopped work.

Miss E. F.'s horizons have contracted to the flat and the

nearest shops, and after an active life of work in a busy office this must be hard. Nevertheless, she does not complain and accepts with dignity the role of the unmarried daughter who must sacrifice her own interests for those of her parents. She dismisses her social isolation as unimportant, but she may find when she is in a position to take up a different kind of life that she has lost many contacts that will be difficult to replace, and with them the art of making new ones.

The National Council for the Single Woman and her Dependants knows of hundreds of women in similar circumstances, and some of them are described in their latest publication.¹ Some of these are women in their 70s with 90-year-old parents. The council offers advice and help to women in such a position, and asks the Government and local authorities to consider possible forms of help. It must act circumspectly, since the Charity Commissioners do not like activity that might be construed as political. The council is now asking the Chancellor if the personal allowance of £100 granted to some with dependent children could be extended to those caring for the elderly and infirm. The council also wants women of 60 to get free medical prescriptions since at present they are not entitled to them unless they have no income except their pensions and very little capital. It is also inquiring about the provision of home helps for single women with infirm dependants. Home helps are scarce in many areas, and frequent changes are upsetting to the old, who are confused and anxious about the stream of strangers coming into their homes. Some local authorities base contributions for home helps not only on the income of the old person but on the daughter's income as well, so that a woman earning £10 a week may be asked to pay £1.25, which she cannot afford.

Housing for Two-person Families

Sheltered housing for two-person families would be a great boon for a single woman with an old parent, but as yet no local authority provides them. A two-bedroomed flat, with a warden on call during the day, might enable a woman to remain at work until the age of 60, and avoid the troubles entailed in giving up work. Leaving work to keep an infirm parent at home may carry severe penalties. The woman is not unemployed or sick so is entitled to no benefits, and it may be very difficult for her to find the money for her class three non-employed insurance stamp. The retirement pension depends on having an average of 50 stamps a year while employed, and when a parent eventually dies the woman may find herself unemployable without re-training—of which there is very little. Until she can get back into work and acquire class one stamps on her card she cannot build up her entitlement to benefit, and her pension is in jeopardy. This aspect is something that a sympathetic government could change without much difficulty or cost.

¹ *Single Women Talking*. The National Council of the Single Woman and her Dependants, Ltd., 166 Victoria Street, London S.W.1